

A Secession Congregation in its Community: The Stirling Congregation of the Rev. Ebenezer Erskine, 1731-1754

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In 1980, in this journal, Henry Fulton described what he called "The Managed Career of the Rev. Charles Moore of Stirling".¹ In his article, he quoted from a letter which Moore had written to the Argyll agent in Stirling, Captain Charles Campbell:

"I doe what I am capable to open the eyes of our misled people that they may not emPLICITLY given in to the perpetual pernicious preachings of such as leave noe stone unturned to inflame this poor place, nae the nation that they themselves have the helm to steer it to its ruin."

The "misled people" were members of his own congregation in Stirling; the purpose of this present contribution is to examine that "misled people" under the guidance of that "perpetually pernicious preacher", Ebenezer Erskine, and to see how the First Secession congregation in Stirling affected the affairs of the town.

Two main factors make it worthwhile to study the secession in the context of one town. Although not the first post-revolution splinter group in the Scottish church, the First Secession was the first rival formal structure. The Associate Presbytery was set up with a structure which echoed the national church and allowed for expansion. Secondly, groups like the Cameronians and Episcopalians were largely scattered and rural; the strength of the secession lay in its urban base in towns like Stirling and Perth, although it had strong rural support as well. Thus, the presence of a strong rival church in a Scottish town was essentially a new phenomenon, and the interaction of such a congregation with the institutions of that town, a matter of considerable interest.

This study therefore examines the phenomenon in the context of Stirling; it does not look at the theology of the early seceders, nor at the progress of the church nationally beyond a brief glance at the background. It splits into two parts; the activities of Erskine's supporters before the setting up of a secession congregation, and the nature and influence of the congregation in the affairs of the town.

¹ H. L. Fulton, "The Managed Career of the Rev. Charles Moore of Stirling", *ante*, xx (1980), 231-247.

The Associate Presbytery was, like its younger sisters the Relief Church and Free Church, a child of the Patronage Act of 1712. The specific cause of the secession was a change in the attitude of the General Assembly, which, by allowing "riding committees" and disallowing the minuting of dissent, was seen tacitly to be accepting the principle of patronage. Added to this tendency was the curious decision in 1732 that presbyteries which did not record a decision when the Riding Act was remitted for consideration under the Barrier Act, were really voting in favour of the motion. The disquietude of the evangelical party in the church is easy to understand.

Erskine was at this time the moderator of the Synod of Perth and Stirling, and the story of his sermon to the synod is well known. His plain speaking to the synod in the autumn of 1732 caused considerable offence and he found himself on the path which led to censure at synod, commission of Assembly and the General Assembly, and finally to his deposition some years later. More immediately, it led to the meeting at Gairney Bridge which constituted the Associate Presbytery on 6 December 1733.

Erskine's synod sermon is frequently quoted to show the democratic bent of the Erskinites, but it should not be forgotten that it was preached to a synod of ministers and well-to-do elders and not to his own congregation. Within a very few months however, it was printed and circulated.

That, then, is the national background. What of Erskine himself? He was a known leader of the evangelical wing of the church. Before coming to Stirling, he had been one of the "Marrowmen" and had been rather a stormy petrel in Fife. Over the years while he ministered in Portmoak, he had been involved in three abortive calls, but finally agreed to come to Stirling. The reasons for this late acceptance are obscure; one biographer puts it down to the wish of his second wife, Mary Webster, for urban life instead of the unfashionable and possibly unhealthy backwaters of Fife.² To this should be added Erskine's own admiration for Archibald Hamilton who was minister of the first charge of Stirling, and perhaps the fact that the Assembly elder for Stirling was his distant kinsman, James Erskine, Lord Grange, the leading lay evangelical of the time.

In 1730, Stirling had two ministers; the elderly evangelical Hamilton and the moderate Moore. The two of them shared services in one half of the pre-reformation parish church, which had been split in two during a seventeenth-century schism in the congregation. In November 1730, the Merchant Guildry and the Incorporated Trades of the town petitioned the town council complaining of the lack of space in the east half of the church. In

² Fraser, *The Life and Diary of Ebenezer Erskine* (Edinburgh, 1831).

response, the office-bearers of the council met with the two ministers and suggested that, in return for an augmentation in stipend, they might preach in both halves of the church and thus double available places. On 14 December, the ministers replied, declining the arrangement. Hamilton, pleading age and infirmity, commented that he understood that the wish of both the town and the kirk session was for a third minister. Moore recognised this, too, but sought a delay for consultation with the presbytery. By a great majority, the town council voted to proceed without delay. 16 January saw the council pass an act of relief which laid down the source of the third minister's stipend and, in April, the presbytery sustained a call to Ebenezer Erskine with "the unanimous consent of the whole community as also with the consent of the present ministers". The speed of the whole process was so atypical of the normal pattern as to suggest that the calling of Erskine was the intention from the beginning.³

At Erskine's induction in September 1731, one of the attending ministers, Thomas Mair of Orwell, found that many of the leading people of the town were "apprehensive that Mr Erskine might disturb the harmony of the place". Mair, himself rather a disturber of harmony, assured the worriers of Erskine's "pacific disposition and high-toned character".⁴ He certainly inspired loyalty for it is recorded that some of his Portmoak congregation followed him to Stirling and settled there.

This, then, is a summary of the background to Erskine's call. The town that he came to was a county town, a market town, a royal burgh which had been almost the second capital of Scotland until the Union of the Crowns, but a town which had declined in importance over the seventeenth century. It was governed by a town council made up of 21 men, 14 from the Merchant Guildry, and seven from the Incorporated Trades. The guildry was therefore the aristocracy of the town and included not only the most prosperous merchants but also members of some of the county families from the surrounding area. Owing to a particularly egregious episode of corruption, some 40 years earlier, the town had a sett, or constitution, which was relatively open. Half the councillors had to retire each year and office-bearers could serve no more than two consecutive years in any one office. This compares favourably with a town like Dingwall where only two out of fifteen had to retire or Edinburgh which apparently was entirely self-perpetuating. What actually happened was that some remained on council year in year out while others came and went every other year. Thus, John Gillespie, a guild-brother and one of the town's

³ Central Region Archives [CRA], Stirling Town Council minutes [STC], B66/21/6, Jan.-Feb. 1731.

⁴ R. Small, *History of the Congregations of the U.P. Church from 1733-1900* (Edinburgh, 1904), ii, 663.

physicians, was councillor for 19 out of 20 consecutive years, being a bailie for 11 years, dean of guild for five, provost for one and merchant councillor for two. The position of provost was purely honorific, dean of guild was the position of power as the dean acted as *praeses* of the council.

As well as the royal burgh, the parish of Stirling contained the castle, and this had considerable influence, economic and hence political, on the town. Votes could be bought by fat contracts. As hereditary keepers of the castle up until the '15, the earls of Mar had had that influence and even after the failure of the rebellion, some still survived, for the M.P. for Stirling Burghs was Thomas, Lord Erskine, son of the exiled earl, while the town's elder at the General Assembly was James Erskine, Lord Grange, the earl's brother. Dominating Broad Street still, Mar's "Wark" shows the family's traditional strength in the town. In the same way, Argyll's "Lodging" was the power base of the Campbells and at this time was occupied by Captain Charles Campbell, the addressee of Moore's letter. Influence, however, can be exaggerated; Alloa was much more under Mar's control than Stirling, yet in the Jacobite rising of 1715 it furnished only three men to the Jacobite cause. Burghal independence was considerable and jealously guarded.⁵

National developments also impinged on local affairs. Politically, Britain was in the middle of the Whig supremacy under the premiership of Sir Robert Walpole; and Scotland was firmly thirled to Walpole's mill, as tended by the Duke of Argyll and his brother, 1st Earl of Islay. This was largely due to the judicious use of political and other patronage. For the first time, however, Walpole was vulnerable nationally; the reasons for this lies in the unpopularity of the Excise Act which was passing through parliament. 1734 was an election year and the excise question united the opposition to Walpole into one party, variously called the "patriots", "squadron" or "country party". This was an alternative Whig party led by the Duke of Newcastle, and in Scotland, by the Duke of Montrose.

Excise had been a sensitive subject in Scotland ever since the union of the parliaments and there had been serious riots in Glasgow in 1726. Leading members of the squadron, such as Montrose and James Erskine of Grange saw their opportunity. Walpole was particularly afraid of the possible intervention of Grange in the elections. So much was this so that he had a statute enacted forbidding judges from standing for parliament. This proved a dilemma for Grange. If Walpole should fall, he had high hopes of becoming Secretary for Scotland with the attendant power, influence and opportunity for making money, but only if he

⁵ J. Ramsay of Ochertyre, *Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1888), ii, 55.

were in parliament. He resigned his seat on the bench and became once more James Erskine of Grange, advocate. He also decided to stand for his nephew's seat of Stirling Burghs, with the later-decided seat of Clackmannanshire as a stand-by. Thomas Erskine, therefore, was to stand for Stirling County, where, it was hoped, residual loyalty to his father might draw Jacobite votes as well as the dissident Whig ones.

The stage was therefore set for a bitter struggle; the excise question was the obvious issue to stress. In a letter to the earl of Marchmont, Grange wrote:⁶

“The spirit is certainly rising in this county and will rise if due care and diligence be used . . . (the matter) of the excise but begins to be known among most of our people and it offends them highly.”

In this context, it was inevitable that the religious strife in Stirling and elsewhere should become a political issue, and this is what happened. The constituency of Stirling Burghs contained South Queensferry, Culross, Inverkeithing and Dunfermline, as well as Stirling. Erskine had contacts in Culross, his brother Ralph was minister in Dunfermline, and both used their pulpits as political hustings in support of Grange.

That then was the political position early in 1734. The next question is to try to establish how the religious supporters of Erskine acted during the campaign. To find this out requires reference to the events of the previous year. After the assembly of 1733, Erskine was technically suspended but until sentence was intimated in Stirling, the suspension could not take place. At the meeting of the commission of Assembly which tried his case, Grange acted as his advocate while Lord Islay led a hostile attack. One of the audience described the proceedings to another Stirlingshire land-owner, the pro-establishment William Murray of Polmaise, and ascribed Grange's advocacy to his wish to keep up his “interest”:⁷

“Lord Grange spoke long and most artfully and I never heard so much made of so vile a cause. . . . I presume all this was to keep up his interest with these folk.”

This implies that he looked on Erskine's supporters to give him political backing, although at the same time he had to be careful not to alienate the land-owners who were also vital to the cause of the squadrone. Islay's enmity to Erskine seems to have been directly due to his seeing Erskine's attack on ecclesiastical patronage as an attack on his resources.

⁶ H.M.C. *Polwarth*, v, letter 114, Grange to Marchmont, 10 Dec. 1733.

⁷ SRO, Murray of Polmaise Muniments, GD189/2/132, [Alexander Bayne] to William Murray of Polmaise, 10 Aug. [1733].

The local elections in Stirling occurred at Michaelmas and so September 1733 decided the make-up of the council which would elect the delegate to vote in the parliamentary election of 1734. That council was not radically different from its predecessors but it did include some of Erskine's supporters: most notably, John Gibb who provided a home for Erskine for many years, and Gibb's brother-in-law, James Alexander. By the end of 1733, Grange was fairly confident in Stirling:⁸

"My affair seems to take very well in Stirling, and I think would seem sure were it not for one sly underhand fellow whom yet I hope to join or defeat."

However, the expected government candidate, who did not in the event stand for the constituency, Cunningham of Boquhan suggested to various councillors that more harm might come to Erskine if the town tried to thwart Lord Islay. Ebenezer Erskine himself scotched that idea for he knew the extent of Islay's enmity.

The affair of Erskine remained an active issue even after this. The formal suspension of Erskine had not been executed in the town and the commission of assembly decreed that this should be done on or before the fourth Sunday of April 1734. The minister nominated for this thankless task might be expected to meet with some resistance, and Grange commented in a letter:⁹

"It will make them [i.e. the magistrates] liable . . . and give a handle to Lord Ilay to disturb the election."

Fortunately, the minister was amenable to influence from the Duke of Montrose's factor and did not try to carry out his commission for it was reported that:¹⁰

"The mob got up, as it's said to the number of four thousand and neither the magistrates nor the military thought fit to meddle with them, so the thing is undone."

In Perth, where the same sentence was to be carried out upon William Wilson, it is reported that the minister appointed, Adam Fergusson, though accompanied by several armed men, was set upon and all were "severely cudgelled and obliged to retire *re infecta*".¹¹ Thus it can be seen that the ecclesiastical strife was also a political issue in the burgh of Stirling.

As it happened, due to a piece of political chicanery, Grange was not elected to parliament for Stirling Burghs, even although he

⁸ H.M.C. *Polwarth*, v, letter 112, Grange to Marchmont, 1 Dec. 1733.

⁹ SRO, Montrose Muniments, GD220/5/1286/4, Grange to Mungo Graeme of Gorthie, 5 April 1734.

¹⁰ James Naysmith to Alexander Murray of Broughton, 10 March 1734, quoted in J. Fergusson, *Lowland Lairds* (London, 1949).

¹¹ *Caledonian Mercury*, 2 April 1734.

had the support of three of the five delegates. He became instead the member for Clackmannanshire while, nationally, the cause of the squadrone was lost.

This, then, is the context of Moore's letter quoted at the start. It begins:¹²

“It's very good news that the patriots have their languages confounded; may good Lord write disorders and disappointment on every measure tending to sapp the foundations of what's dear to us men and Christians.”

Erskine, as a political opponent, was clearly not a Christian.

That really was the end of the secession as a national political issue. Locally, however, its significance grew. The election of Michaelmas 1734 saw Erskine's supporters almost with a monopoly in the council. The office bearers of the previous council were largely purged; the dean of guild, three of the four bailies and the immediate ex-provost all lost their places. This was almost unheard of and represents a considerable coup. The election was reported at length in the anti-government newspaper *The Thistle*.¹³ It is notable that two of the defeated bailies were leaders of the anti-Erskine faction on the kirk session, Maiben and Millar. The former was the town's postmaster and during the parliamentary election, Grange had found it necessary to instruct correspondents to write to him in Stirling under cover to John Gibb and addressed in “a coarse country hand”. Walpole's use of the postal services for gaining intelligence is well known. Gibb, Ebenezer Erskine's landlord, also supplied Grange with local intelligence.¹⁴

After the election of Michaelmas 1734, the patriots and Erskinites were in control. James Alexander was dean of guild, John Gibb, a bailie, and others were also office bearers. The pro-government party, however, did not give up without a struggle and the election was challenged, albeit unsuccessfully.

The following month, a riot took place in the town. In the midst of all the legal processes afterwards, what actually happened is not clear. It would appear, however, that the town guard was attacked by a group of revellers. Little damage was done beyond a few cracked skulls. Yet, the riot was important in view of its protagonists. The rioters included the M.P. for the county, the new sheriff depute, the ex-provost and other former councillors and a variety of government postholders and military men. It is unclear just what Erskine's rôle in this event was. One local historian, last

¹² National Library of Scotland [NLS], Saltoun Papers, MS 16,558/14, Charles Moore to Captain Campbell, Quoted in Fulton, *ante*.

¹³ *The Thistle*, Jan. 1735, reprinted in W. B. Cook, *The Stirling Antiquary* (Stirling, 1893), i, 70-83.

¹⁴ SRO, Mar & Kelly Muniments, GD124/15/1432/1, John Gibb to Grange, 22 March 1734.

century, believed that he wrote the description printed in *The Thistle*, but on what evidence is unknown.¹⁵ Nonetheless, there is no doubt that in government eyes he was involved. In a letter to Islay, Lord Milton, the Lord Justice Clerk, referred to the town council side in the court cases as “Ebenezer Erskine’s people” and commented on their predisposition to perjury.¹⁶

In the many law suits which followed this fracas, Grange acted as advocate for the town council and its supporters. In 1735, he was made an honorary burgess and provost of Stirling as a token of gratitude. Once more Erskine’s supporters remained identifiably in control. The Erskinite faction, however, was not totally united: John Gillespie had been one of them; but in 1735 his mother drowned and in a sermon shortly afterwards, Erskine:¹⁷

“In setting furth the temptations of the devil in this town pointed in so lively a way at the accident of drowning that the whole eyes of the people turned on Gillespie.”

Gillespie blamed John Gibb for having put the idea into Erskine’s head, and the followers of the two men came to blows. Gillespie does not thereafter figure as a seceder, although Grange retained his political support.

Although a relationship can be established between the patriot party in the town council and the followers of Ebenezer Erskine, care must be taken not to exaggerate Erskine’s influence over the councillors, even amongst his strongest supporters.

Bailie Alexander prevailed upon the council to sell him a small piece of land belonging to the town’s Common Good in defiance of an anti-corruption measure called the “Long Act” which each councillor had to endorse at his election.¹⁸ At this stage, Ebenezer Erskine entered the argument to such effect that Alexander was driven to write to Grange, who was provost at the time, asking for his intervention:¹⁹

“Our minister, Mr Erskine, and his wife and son-in-law have been going through the town and clamouring that the council have been guilty of perjury, reckoning that this deed of council breaches the Long Act. . . . Council seems very dissatisfied with Mr Erskine or any of that family in meddling, putting constructions of their own making and contriving on

¹⁵ *The Thistle*, Jan. 1735, in Cook, *Stirling Antiquary*, i, 71.

¹⁶ NLS, Saltoun Papers, MS 16,559/102, Milton to Islay, March 1735. The sentence is scored out in this copy letter but its being scored out does not contradict Milton’s belief.

¹⁷ NLS, Saltoun Papers, MS 116,559/204, Archibald Campbell to Milton 26 Sept. 1735.

¹⁸ CRA, STC, B66/21, 3 Aug. 1695.

¹⁹ SRO, Mar & Kelly Muniments, GD124/15/1460/1, James Alexander to Grange, 1 Sept. 1736.

the act. As Mr Erskine our minister is just now in Edinburgh, if you be in company with him, [we ask] that you'll advise him not to meddle in any of our affairs seeing as it does not belong to his function."

Notwithstanding further letters from all the bailies, including Alexander and Erskine's friend John Gibb, Grange agreed with Erskine. "Honest men," he wrote, "should submit to checks because of the knaves who follow them." Alexander withdrew his offer to buy.²⁰

What this incident suggests is that the secession party on the council was no more scrupulous in its actions than anybody else and that they tried to make a clear division between civil and religious concerns; a view not shared by their pastor. The quarrel did not lead to the loss of Alexander's support for the secession, but it does show the limits of the church's influence in the town.

Up to this point, the term "seceder" has been used rather loosely to identify Erskine's supporters in the town and congregation. After the meeting at Gairney Bridge which constituted the Associate Presbytery, Erskine was *ipso facto* a seceder; his congregation was not in secession. There was still one kirk session in Stirling, and, in theory, one congregation. The session contained those of both camps and, what is more, it reflected the political divisions of the town, for the council and the session were drawn from the same small segment of the population and most elders also had served as councillors. Specifically, Maiben, postmaster and pro-government bailie, also served on Erskine's and Moore's session.

What brought matters to a crisis in the session and congregation was the death of Moore in November 1736. The sacrament of communion had not been celebrated in Stirling for five years, due to Moore's declining to celebrate in company with the suspended Erskine. Within two months of his death, the session and council agreed on a communion service to be held in April. Five of the seventeen elders refused to take part and minuted a long protest describing the irregularities of Erskine and praising the memory of Moore. This split reflects in some measure the split in the council of three years earlier.²¹

The five claimed to be the only true kirk session of Stirling, but the other twelve held the church. The most immediate result was the prevention of any attempt to call a new minister. A long legal process, however, ensued and this led finally to the deposition of Erskine.

²⁰ SRO, Mar & Kelly Muniments, GD124/15/1460/4, Grange to Bailies and Deacon Convener of Stirling, 7 Sept. 1736; CRA, STC, B66/21/7, 23 Sept. 1736.

²¹ CRA Stirling Kirk Session Minutes [SKS], CH2/1026/6, 26 Jan. 1737, and CH2/1026/8, 22 April 1737.

Legal recognition of the five elders came after the death of Alexander Hamilton, minister of the first charge, in January 1738. In the March, they were recognised as the true kirk session and met with James Mackie of St Ninians as their interim moderator. In October of that year, one of the praying societies of Stirling approached the associate presbytery bearing its adherence to the presbytery's testimony. One unidentified elder was a party to this. The remainder of the twelve elders formally acceded the following March, as did some dissenting elders from the neighbouring parish of St Ninians. In June 1739, Erskine was appointed to constitute and hold session with the dissenting elders of St Ninians and other places contiguous with Stirling and the associate congregation of Stirling formally came into being.²²

With a formal split in the session, the political tide turned. The elections of Michaelmas 1738 saw the loss of many of the seceders from the town council. In fact, apparently only one survived, James Stevenson, although he was in the key position of dean of guild. Shortly afterwards, the town council petitioned the presbytery for the vacant charge caused by the death of Moore to be filled; Stevenson did not appear and his subscription to the council minutes was made under protest. Stevenson left the council in 1739 when a new grouping, identifiably established kirk and pro-government came to power. This group was based on the Christie family, a family of note in Stirling from 1700 until the late nineteenth century. Among its members at this time were James Christie, a clothier, who acted as agent for the Argyll family and who claimed to have lost more than half his custom as a result of anti-government feeling in 1734.²³ Another member was Harry Christie, one of the five elders who remained in the establishment after the events of 1738. Only after this group came to power was Erskine finally barred from the parish church building, first by the presbytery on Hogmanay 1740 and a few days later by the magistrates.²⁴

Never again did the seceders hold sway in the council, nonetheless they were still powerful enough to take some credit for the election of Grange as M.P. for Stirling Burghs in 1741. Thereafter, seceders returned to the council in small numbers and by the end of the decade two, George Henderson and James Alexander, effectively shared power with John Gillespie.

That then was the political position as it involved the seceders in the 1730s; the next theme is the nature of the congregation as a whole and its place in Stirling society in the years after its formal adherence to the Associate Presbytery. The earliest minute book of the congregation is long lost, but the earliest minutes of all were

²² CRA, STC, B66/21/7, 5 Feb. 1735 and 6 Sept. 1735.

²³ NLS Saltoun Papers, MS 17,700/56, James Christie to Islay, [1734].

²⁴ A. R. McEwan, *The Erskines* (Edinburgh, 1900) 105.

contained in the minutes of the parish church until their enforced transfer, and thus survive.²⁵

It has been seen that until the process started to call new ministers in succession to Moore and Hamilton, Erskine's supporters had considerable power in the town. This says nothing of the numerical strength of the movement, since that power depended on the adherence of a small body of men. One early indication of numbers is to be found in the decision to have three thousand tokens made for the communion planned for April 1737.²⁶

After this time, the most obvious source of information is the number of baptisms carried out under the aegis of the associate session of Stirling. (See table 1 below.) Where religiously homogeneous groups are concerned, it is accepted that the multiplication of the number of baptisms in one year by a factor of 35 or 36 will give a reasonably accurate figure for the population of an eighteenth-century parish.²⁷ As early as 1842, a similar figure was postulated in the *New Statistical Account* for St Ninians where the author multiplied baptisms by 34 to estimate population growth.²⁸ This, however, gives the highly suspect figure of a congregation of 7,000 to 8,000. This kind of estimate may not be appropriate for such a gathered congregation; it may be that admirers of Erskine brought their children to be baptised without any other links with the congregation. However, if numbers for individual parishes are abstracted, some correlation can be seen. This is particularly true of the parishes of Stirling and St Ninians where it is interesting to compare the numbers of baptisms in the established church. (See table 2 below.)

To use this as a direct comparison demands that the age structure of the various congregations is similar. A secession which particularly drew older people would tend to have a relatively low number of baptisms, while one attractive to the young would have a higher proportion. No conclusion can be drawn regarding the nature of Erskine's congregation, but it might have been expected that his appeal to what he considered the true values of the covenanting church and his condemnation of modern rationalist trends in theology might not attract the young. He himself was in middle age, an unapproachable figure and the oldest of the four original members of the Associate Presbytery. There is no evidence that the young were particularly drawn to him. On balance it seems safest to assume that the number of baptisms per head of congregation was no different than that in the established church. By this token, Erskine drew about one third of the population of St

²⁵ CRA, SKS, CH2/1026/7.

²⁶ CRA, SKS, CH2/1026/6, 26 Jan. and 9 March 1737.

²⁷ T. H. Hollingsworth, *Historical Demography* (London, 1969), 149n.

²⁸ *New Statistical Account for Stirlingshire* (Edinburgh, 1842), 325.

Ninians and about half of that of Stirling, together with a substantial number from other parishes.

As can be seen from table 1, the congregation was a gathered one; the number of parishes represented is considerable but fluctuating. The tendency was for the number to diminish over the years. This, even coupled with a dropping of numbers, does not signify a diminution of support. On the contrary, the numbers shrank because neighbouring parishes were able to support independent congregations. Balfron erected a church in 1742, one at Bridge of Teith in 1744 served the parishes of Kilmadock, Lecropt, Dunblane and Callander. The Falkirk members erected their church in 1743, while Alloa followed suit in 1745.²⁹

By 1741, Erskine had a kirk session which comprised the twelve Stirling elders and seven others, mainly from St Ninians. Outside the town the congregation was divided into "correspondences" which received a visit from a minister or student perhaps once a month. An early priority was the augmentation of the session to take account of the widespread nature of the congregation. After the admission of the St Ninians elders, the other areas prepared lists of potential elders and the session ordained those selected.

Almost as soon as they were turned out of the West Kirk, the Stirling congregation looked for a new home; John Gibb provided it. Although the legal documents quote a price of three thousand merks for the land, which had formed part of Gibb's orchard, it is said that no money changed hands, but that Gibb donated it. The same source describes how much of the labour in the building was provided by the congregation:³⁰

"The farmers gave carriages, labourers devoted part of their time to excavate the foundations of the buildings. . . . It is said that those labourers who were engaged worked for very low wages and for want of better implements carried off the earth in creels or sacks, and that some colliers from Bannockburn rendered valuable service in this way."

The church was built to hold three thousand people while a further area behind the church was designated a preaching green. Evidently a large congregation was expected. Legally, the building was not a church but a meeting house and the session was sufficiently worried by the legal implications to take steps to protect the congregation. The congregation itself, having no existence in law, could hold no property in its corporate name and so, after legal advice had been

²⁹ McKelvie, *Annals and Statistics of the U.P. Church* (Edinburgh, 1873), 633. Small, *History*, i, 670, 679.

³⁰ E. Gentleman, "Memorials of Erskine Church, Stirling", *Stirling Natural History and Archaeological Society Transactions* [SNHSS Trans.] xxx, (1907-8), 94-122, at 103-4.

taken, the property was owned and leased and granted in tack so that various groups could claim legal title to it.³¹ The church had a committee of management for the temporal affairs of the congregation. At first, this committee numbered four, one elder and three others, all apparently prosperous. This use of managers allowed new blood into the affairs of the congregation without adding to the numbers of elders based in the town of Stirling.

From these accounts, it can be seen that the congregation contained a cross-section of Stirlingshire society from the richest class of merchant, such as Gibb or Alexander, to the colliers and labourers. The Incorporation of Weavers was strong in its support for Erskine in 1738, while, apparently alone of the incorporations, the Mechanics took a pew in the new church. This latter occurrence may be unique in the secession church in Scotland.³²

This cross-section, however, was not fully representative, for it was said that the established church retained "the very ton and upper class of the burgh" while other than the Gibbs, Alexanders and Connals, the seceders were "rather plebeian or common folk".³³

The rural seceders, too, were of the lower orders on the whole. One minor laird was Edward Mayne of Powis and Logie with some of his family, but he seems to have been exceptional.³⁴ After "The Breach", the minority "anti-burgher" section sometimes gave occupations of fathers in the baptismal roll which reveals that the predominant class was that of farmers, skilled labourers and tradesmen, such as weavers and blacksmiths.³⁵ Ramsay of Ochertyre, who had few good words to say for the secession, described the social mix thus: "although few of their adherents were persons of figure or education, numbers of them were substantial burghers or farmers".³⁶

There can be little doubt that, notwithstanding his own political activities, Erskine's own motives for seceding were religious. The sermon which led to his suspension shows many of these reasons: leaders of the church, while retaining the shell of the ordinances never regarded the end, they dabbled in politics; they "valued themselves exceedingly upon their connection with the great folk of the day". Erskine wanted a return to seventeenth-

³¹ *Ibid.*, 106-7.

³² D. B. Morris, *The Incorporation of Weavers of Stirling* (Stirling, 1926), 41; Gentleman, "Memorials", 102; J. S. Marshall, "Scottish Trade Incorporations and the Church", ante, xix (1976), 93-109, at 107.

³³ Stirling District Libraries, MS Robert Shirra, "The Black Bond", 23.

³⁴ A. Morrison, *The Maynes of Powis and Logie* (Stirling, 1927); SRO, CH3/559/17, Stirling Associate Session baptismal roll, 9 Jan. 1739.

³⁵ CRA, CH3/552/1, Anti-burgher session of Stirling baptismal roll.

³⁶ Ramsay, *Scotsmen*, ii, 4.

century theocracy. It is tempting to look at his appeal to his listeners as an early example of democracy:³⁷

“I can find no warrant from the word of God to confer the spiritual privileges of his house upon the rich beyond the poor; whereas by this act, the man with the gold ring and the gay clothing is preferred unto the man with the vile raiment and poor attire.”

It should be remembered that this sermon was preached not to the lay people of Stirling but to a body of ministers and elders, many of whom were landowners.³⁸ Where Erskine and his congregation do seem to be at one was in the view that the General Assembly did not adequately represent the church, but was simply another facet of a remote governmental power.

In the neighbouring parish of St Ninians, which provided the majority of the congregation, the prime cause of secession was the intrusion of James Mackie and his adhesion to the interests of the government. Here an economic factor perhaps enters in. Light industry came to St Ninians early as did agricultural improvement. The *First Statistical Account* describes how, while the population as a whole was growing, the numbers living outwith the villages shrank as farms were enclosed.³⁹ The process was just starting up in the 1730s; there may have been resentment against the landowners, there certainly was a growing remoteness from them as the peasantry and small tenants left the estates and moved to growing villages of Bannockburn, Cambusbarron, Throsk, Plean, St Ninians and several others. There they became weavers, colliers, nailers, in short, men with no contact with men of influence.

To suggest that for the lay people, the reasons for secession were fundamentally economic or political rather than religious is somewhat simplistic. The lay seceders were concerned in the specifically religious aspects, as was their minister. Some of them, indeed, may well have been almost as articulate. A so-called uneducated man in eighteenth-century Scotland might well be deeply versed in theology, as Scott's portrait of Davie Deans testifies.

A paper handed in to the kirk session of the neighbouring parish of Logie in 1738 illustrates the extent to which Erskine's supporters were concerned in religious questions. The members who subscribed to this paper commented on the case of Professor John Simson in Glasgow who was tried for heresy, on the intrusion of the Porteous Act into the services of the church and the paper

³⁷ E. Erskine, “The stone rejected. . . .”, in *Select Writings of Ebenezer Erskine* (Edinburgh, 1848), i, 329.

³⁸ SRO, Synod of Perth and Stirling minutes, CH2/449/8, show most of the ruling elders present to have been landowners and heritors.

³⁹ *Old Statistical Account* [OSA], xviii, 397, St Ninians Parish.

alludes to the apostasy of the established church as a whole from the covenanting principles of the previous century. Having discussed the ills from which the national church was suffering, the paper then accused the minister of Logie, Patrick Duchal, of being party to some of these backslidings. The paper was later retracted and it is a matter of doubt whether the signatories were really the authors, as they claimed not to have wanted to offend their minister.⁴⁰

There is no evidence to suggest that natural forces helped the secession on its way. It has been suggested that the wave of "revivals" which swept the established church during the 1740s drew part of its momentum from the famine of 1740⁴¹ but the gradual growth of the secession does not allow of such an interpretation for it. In any case, grain prices during the 1730s are evidence of plenty and prosperity.⁴² On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that Erskine at least saw political and civil disturbance in Stirling during that decade as a sign of divine displeasure, alongside adverse weather. Erskine called for a public fast in January 1738 and the reasons he adduced show how his mind was running. Perjuries in trade are cited alongside profanation of the Lord's Day, caballing in the street after sermon, and cursing. He alluded to the death of Guthrie in 1661 and the riots of 1734. The signs of displeasure ranged from political problems, through the death of Hamilton to "the prodigious storm and flood of rain accompanied by God's terrible voice of thunder, fire and uncommon hailstones the last week of June 1733".⁴³ Then he commented on "the extraordinary and awful appearances in the heavens of a bloody and fiery-like air lately" and storms that had cost several lives. This was all very melodramatic, but the fact that his hailstones dated from five years previously argues against there being any real millennialist feeling in the secession.

Having looked at the social standing, so far as it can be gauged, of the seceders, notice has to be taken of one further factor, that of poor relief. In general, this was the duty of kirk sessions. There might therefore seem to be a disincentive for the poorer elements in society to take the risk of losing this safety net. An early concern for the secession church was in collecting for their own poor relief, and legal battles were waged as to whether the established kirk session had the right to all monies collected for this purpose in the parish.⁴⁴ However, the strong financial basis of

⁴⁰ R. M. Fergusson, *Logie, A Parish History* (Paisley, 1905), i, 164-8.

⁴¹ I. A. Muirhead, "The revival as a dimension of Scottish church history", *ante*, xx (1980), 179-197, at 190.

⁴² *Extracts from the records of the Royal Burgh of Stirling* (Glasgow, 1889), appendix viii, 416.

⁴³ CRA, SKS, CH2/1026/6, 11 Jan. 1738.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Gentleman, "Memorials", 96-99.

Cowane's and Spittal's hospitals gave ample non-ecclesiastically controlled poor funds for at least a section of the community.

In moral terms, the breakaway sects of Scottish presbyterianism tend to be considered more stringent than the established church. At this time in Stirling, the established church was itself strict. Even as influential a figure as Bailie Thomas Christie, commissary clerk from the 1720s and town clerk from 1743, had in his youth done penance for fathering an illegitimate child, as had the eldest son of Forrester of Braes, and one of the local physicians, Dr Bauchop.⁴⁵ Some of these cases were handled privately, and it does seem to be true that the lower the offender, the more public was the penance. Nor was censure restricted to the man in the street; one of the elders was summoned and suspended for a year for having been seen drunk and falling off a chair in a change-house the day after communion.⁴⁶ For adultery, the penitents might have to do penance before the congregation more than twenty times before being considered purged.

Nonetheless, the seceders even then had a reputation for greater strictness: Ramsay says of them:⁴⁷

“Let us do the seceding clergy the justice to say, that in their practice, none were more disposed than they to make their hearers virtuous and honest. Their discipline for breaches of morality and decency if anything were too severe.”

It is true that Erskine has been noted clamping down on dishonesty in trade. His attack on Alexander for trying to buy common good land whilst a magistrate,⁴⁸ and on Patrick Stevenson for trying to become factor of Cowane's Hospital while a bailie⁴⁹ show this trait. This being the case, it might have been expected that there would be fewer cases of immorality brought to the notice of the session in Erskine's church. This is not entirely borne by the evidence. Both the session minutes for 1745-50 and the baptismal roll from 1739 show a small but significant number of illegitimate births⁵⁰ and indeed, one of the elders was punished for fornication.⁵¹ It seems strange that they were prepared to submit to the harsher sentence of the secession church rather than go back to the establishment. One transgressor as well as appearing before the associate session also confessed to the established church session of Logie, but had “no

⁴⁵ CRA, SKS, CH2/1026/6, 13 Dec. 1729, 25 March 1732, 19 April 1732.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23 April 1729.

⁴⁷ Ramsay, *Scotsmen*, ii, 8.

⁴⁸ SRO, Mar & Kelly Muniments, GD124/15/1460/1, James Alexander to Grange, 1 Sept. 1736.

⁴⁹ Shirra, “Black Bond”, 32.

⁵⁰ CRA, Stirling Associate Session minutes [SAS], CH3/559/1, e.g. 30 Jan. 1745.

⁵¹ CRA, SAS minutes, CH3/559/1, 26 Feb. 1746.

mind to submit to their discipline".⁵² It might be argued that if the offenders were servants or employees of seceders then their masters might insist on their remaining seceders, too, but while some were servants, others were not and in some cases the masters were offenders.

For all their strictness, however, it would appear that the seceders were forgiving. One of the early charges against Erskine was that he was willing to accept unabsolved offenders from other parishes as sponsors in the baptism of their children.⁵³

"You have been guilty of great irregularities, particularly by baptising the child of John Ferguson, merchant in Doune, though the minister of Kilmadock declared he would not have admitted him to be a sponsor without giving satisfaction for the scandals that lay against him, which you did at Stirling."

The Jacobite rising of 1745 also led to disciplinary cases of a different sort; various members were charged with "sinful compliance with the rebels when here" but also with oath-breaking.⁵⁴

"He being a militiaman, was taken prisoner by the rebels when here and had given his oath to them not to lift arms against them and afterwards did lift arms."

In other words, both the giving of the oath and its breaking were considered to be sinful acts and both had to be atoned for. Punishment was, however, limited to a rebuke in front of the session. The question of oaths was soon to assume a greater significance.

In moral questions, the other unexpected aspect is the lack of apparent animus between the established and secession congregations in Stirling. Tradition has the seceders being excommunicated for attending the established church, but this did not happen at that time in Stirling. It is true that the established church, at least in St Ninians, did not recognise a penance done before the associate session.⁵⁵ However, the first discipline case of this nature to survive in the Associate session minutes does not occur until April 1756.⁵⁶ This is in stark contrast to the enmity found between the two sections of the secession church after the breach of 1747. In December 1751, one John Henderson was found guilty not only of antenuptial fornication, but also of having "dishonoured the Lord

⁵² *Ibid.*, 27 August 1746.

⁵³ SRO, Mar & Kelly Muniments, GD124/9/115, Copy indictment upon Ebenezer Erskine.

⁵⁴ CRA, SAS minutes, CH3/559/1, 25 May 1746, 2 June 1746.

⁵⁵ CRA, Stirling Presbytery minutes, CH2/722/13, 27 April 1743.

⁵⁶ Ebenezer Gentleman, "Memorials of Erskine Church, Stirling, Part 2", *SNHSS Trans.*, xxxi (1908-9), 58-78, at p. 59.

by hearing Dr Erskine''.⁵⁷ He was excommunicated, at least for a time. In contrast to this attitude, it is clear from the baptismal roll of Erskine's congregation that the witnesses at baptisms included members of the established church. Even Robert Banks, one of the five elders who did not follow Erskine into secession seems to have been a witness at a baptism in the secession church in 1744, while Henry Tours, who became an elder of the established kirk in 1743 was witness at the baptism of twins in 1740. It is likely that the children involved were relatives.⁵⁸

The matter of oaths has been alluded to in two contexts; the Jacobite rising and the "Breach". In the rising, the seceders were entirely Hanoverian in sympathy. In Stirling, Erskine himself was prominent in his opposition to the Jacobites. The *St James's Evening Post*, a London paper, gave an account of the Jacobites' arrival in Stirling which was very hostile to the magistrates as being either cowardly or treacherous, and quotes Erskine as one of two men to protest against the surrender of the town. The town council, it must be said, took great pains to deny this account, and the council minutes show both the offending article and the council's reply.⁵⁹ Erskine himself raised a body of seceder volunteers against the rebels and served as their captain along with Edward Mayne of Powis. When the Jacobites took the town he deemed it expedient to move to the nearby town of Tullibody. On the Jacobites' final defeat at Culloden four months later, the seceders were prominent in their thanksgivings and praise for the duke of Cumberland. A letter from Cumberland's aide-de-camp to Erskine shows that his loyalty had not gone unnoticed:⁶⁰

"Sir,

his Royal Highness has ordered me to tell you, that he is much obliged for your intelligence, and for the zeal you show in his majesty's service. . . ."

The political rehabilitation of Erskine and his followers was complete. Incidentally, possibly for the first time, it was realised that political opposition to the government could go hand in hand with complete loyalty to the crown.

The aftermath of the rebellion brought considerable expense; many had lost property to the soldiers of both armies and they had to be supported out of civil and ecclesiastical funds. As might be expected there was a rise in the number of cases of illegitimacy reported to the sessions. Nationally, the one result was that burgess oaths were rephrased in such a way as to seem to give support to the Church of Scotland, at least in some burghs. This led, amid great

⁵⁷ CRA, Stirling Anti-burgher Session minutes, CH3/552/1, 30 Dec. 1751.

⁵⁸ CRA, SAS, baptismal roll, CH3/559/17, 8 June 1740, 5 Feb. 1744.

⁵⁹ CRA, Stirling Town Council minutes, B66/21/8, 10 Feb. 1746.

⁶⁰ Fraser, *Erskine*, 444.

bitterness, to the “Breach” between burghers and anti-burghers, and split Erskine’s own family.

Important though the breach was nationally, it did not actually affect Stirling much. There was a tendency for congregations to follow their ministers and the personal loyalty of Erskine’s congregation was strong. What made the breach particularly pointless in Stirling was that the form of oath used in the town had no reference to religion.⁶¹

Again using the baptismal rolls as evidence, it can be seen that the main support for the anti-burgher cause was to be found in St Ninians with five baptisms in 1749, rising to 16 in 1760. Stirling had its first baptism in 1751 and by 1760 had risen to only four. Logie and Lecropt provided the greater part of the remainder. This is in contrast to the position in Clackmannanshire, where the greater part of the secession church went over to the anti-burghers.⁶²

Small as the Stirling-based, anti-burgher congregation was, in many ways it was closer to the common image of seceders. Members were disciplined for attending other churches, immorality cases were rare (but not unknown) and members were disciplined for taking the burgher oath in Stirling. This immediately implies that few of the congregation aspired to burgher status, although with a preponderance of members from St Ninians, poverty or class need not be the sole reason for that.

Of the five elders in the anti-burgher session in the early years, only one was from Erskine’s original session, the remainder were from St Ninians or Logie.

Arising from the oaths controversy, the burgher Associate synod became the first protestant church to condemn freemasonry. This they did in 1757, but the matter had been under discussion since 1745. The problem was the initiation ceremony and the blind oath, which, along with the use made of passages of the Bible, were felt to be incompatible with Christian doctrine.

Curiously, in Stirling, the freemasons tended to be associated with the Incorporation of Mechanics, the appropriate trade body for operative masons. This was the one incorporation to take a corporate pew in the secession church. Several Jacobites were connected with the freemasons and the necessity to give aid to them may have embarrassed some fellow masons and made the whole ethos suspect.

Several of the Stirling seceders are known to have been freemasons; most notable was Edward Mayne of Powis, earlier mentioned as co-captain of the seceder volunteers in 1746. Ramsay of Ochertyre records of him that while he was zealous in putting

⁶¹ OSA, viii, 280, Stirling Parish.

⁶² Small, *History*, ii, 679-80.

down the rebellion, he refused to pursue Jacobites after it was quelled:⁶³

“I might fall in with some of my neighbours and I would not hurt a neighbour for the world”

he told General Blakeney. By this time he was a master mason and soon became master of his lodge. Later, he seems to have returned to the established church, whether or not as a result of the ban on freemasonry is not known. Nonetheless, it is curious that the one member of the gentry in Erskine's congregation should be the one to be affected by this attack on freemasonry.

Coming to Stirling in his fifties, Erskine dominated town affairs for twenty years. His religious impact was great, and the process which he started permeated every facet of life in Stirling during his ministry.

The rise of the secession was closely linked to the politics of the time and was a symptom of political dissatisfaction as well as of spiritual grace. It cannot be said that the seceders were morally better than their brethren; some like Alexander were not averse from using political power for personal profit, while even Erskine was not averse from using his religious stance to try to wield political power.

It would be wrong to see the conflict in Stirling as being between moderate and evangelical. With the exception of Moore, the evidence is that almost all were of the evangelical party, and even those who replaced Erskine and Moore in the parish church were evangelicals.

The seceder congregation was numerically strong and represented all strata of the town and surrounding countryside, although its social centre of gravity was somewhat lower than that of the parish church. It was a loyal congregation, prepared to make sacrifices in money or in time. To some extent it was, at least locally, a reaction to social and economic change. In St Ninians, the rural population was becoming more remote from the landlords as they moved from the land to village life and dependence on nail-making or weaving. Nonetheless, it is hard to resist the view that the chief motive was simply the realisation that the Church of Scotland was being ill-served by the kind of people who were influential in its highest courts and by the kind of people who decided what minister should fulfil the spiritual needs of unconsulted parishioners.

Erskine died in 1754 at the age of 74. One of his last sermons included the rather plaintive complaint: “the magistrates and town council must answer unto God for what they have done in this

⁶³ Ramsay, *Scotsmen*, ii, 124-5n.

matter''.⁶⁴ His deposition and barring from the parish church still rankled.

What then of the long term? It is a curious sidelight on Stirling and its rulers that the burgh should be disfranchised for corruption in 1774, a scant twenty years after the death of Erskine. The reason was a conspiracy to carve up political power amongst three prominent burgesses. They were misguided enough to put their agreement in writing, the "Black Band". One of its clauses was the agreement always to call an evangelical minister to the parish kirk. The three signatories comprised two well-known members of the established kirk, the sons of prominent opponents of Erskine. The third was one James Alexander, son of Bailie James Alexander and nephew of John Gibb.⁶⁵ Like his uncle, he was an elder of the secession kirk. Seceders played their full part in the life of Stirling from the start, even in its political corruption.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ MaeEwan, *Erskines*, 144.

⁶⁵ Shirra, "Black Bond", 32.

⁶⁶ For details of the 1734 parliamentary elections, I am indebted to the thesis "Stirlingshire Politics 1707-1832" by R. M. Sunter (Edinburgh Ph.D., 1971). Since this paper was read to the Society, part of Dr Sunter's thesis has been published as chapter 12 of his *Patronage and Politics in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1986). The substance of the present article forms part of my own thesis "Religion, politics and society in Stirling during the ministry of Ebenezer Erskine, 1731-1754" (Stirling, M.Litt., 1983).

APPENDIX

TABLE I

The number of baptisms in the Secession Congregation of Stirling: 1739-1750.

	1739	1740	1741	1742	1743	1744	1745	1746	1747	1748	1749	1750
Stirling	4	32	50	50	66	62	56	46	60	66	62	59
St Ninians	6	34	58	83	91	93	94	84	75	81	76	79
Logie	—	7	12	8	17	11	16	13	12	8	6	6
Falkirk, Denny, Airth, Kilsyth, Larbert, Dunipace, Muiravonside, Stamannan, Cumbernauld	5	18	18	26	19	8	10	6	1	2	1	—
Kincardine	2	3	9	7	13	12	7	10	1	4	2	3
Gargunnoch, Port, Kippen, Fintry	1	3	6	8	4	4	5	4	3	5	4	1
Clackmannan, Alva Alloa, Tillicoultry	2	—	15	9	7	16	9	8	4	1	2	2
Dunblane	2	6	7	5	10	10	7	5	4	6	2	5
Kilmadock, Callander, Lecropt, Muthil, Blackford	3	3	14	13	19	20	14	23	7	5	4	6
Balfon, Drymen, Killearn	—	—	4	4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Others	—	—	1	—	—	2	1	—	—	—	—	—
Total:	25	106	194	213	246	238	219	199	167	178	159	161

TABLE 2

Comparative table of the number of baptisms performed in Stirling
and St Ninians Parishes between 1738 and 1750.

	1738	1739	1740	1741	1742	1743	1744	1745	1746	1747	1748	1749	1750
Stirling: Seceders	—	4	32	50	50	66	62	56	46	60	66	62	59
Stirling: Parish Kirk	136	145	76	102	67	67	89	70	64	91	57	57	72
St Ninians: Seceders	—	6	34	58	83	91	93	94	84	75	81	76	79
St Ninians: Parish Kirk	241	214	223	163	150	172	233	190	203	168	179	173	168
St Ninians: Anti-burghers	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	5	6

Sources:

Both sets of figures for the Seceders come from the baptismal roll of the Associate Congregation of Stirling (CRA, CH3/559/17). The figures for the parish church come from the parish registers, omitting those stated to have been baptised by Erskine after his deposition, but including a small number baptised by an episcopal minister. Seceders' children appear in these rolls only between 1740 and 1744 and in much smaller numbers than were listed in the Associate roll (SRO, OPR490/2). The Antiburgher statistics show no Antiburgher baptisms for Stirling before 1751 (CRA, CH3/552/1).

